

Carol Martin: Theatre of the Real

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CAROL MARTIN. *Theatre of the Real*. Studies in International Performance (Series Editors Janelle Reinelt and Brian Singleton) Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. xiii + 198, illustrated. \$80 (Hb).

Reviewed by Liz Tomlin, University of Birmingham

Theatre of the Real offers an analysis that productively extends Martin's previous body of work on verbatim and documentary performance to address, in addition, models of theatre that engage with the real in diverse and varied practices. The study thus broadens what we might understand as theatre of the real to encompass aesthetics that foreground the 'self' of the actor; the use of puppets to reconfigure imagined yet 'real life' events; adaptation that utilises classic fictional texts to reflect on contemporary reality, interactive theatre and the use of mixed media, documentary footage and live performance to comment on shifting perspectives of the real.

Martin's study revisits key historical productions by Peter Weiss, the Performance Group and JoAnne Akalaitis and but her conceptual framing of a theatre of the real is pre-dominantly contextualised within the recent and contemporary moment, in which sophisticated and global mass-media communication and social networks increasingly construct our experience of 'the real'. Martin positions the narratives of theatre and performance as an additional, and politically vital, channel of information that contributes to the framings and re-framings of reality through "acts of imagination in the forms of reiteration, representation, and narration" (74). Martin's analysis of theatre practice is correspondingly framed by moments, such as her own experience of 9/11, where a sense of 'the real' is constructed from a complex layering of 'live' and mediated perception of events.

Martin's rationale for considering such a diverse range of practice within the rubric of theatre of the real is that all the productions she discusses "intend for spectators to reconsider the world around

them on the basis of the theatrical experiences these works offer" (175). Martin is clear, however, that ideological distinctions can be made between practices that offer a "ritual revocation of authority" and those that merely "ease the dissonance of irresolvable difference to enable forgetting of uncomfortable narratives" (16). This distinction is examined most explicitly in the two chapters that engage pre-dominantly with verbatim and documentary theatre. In her analysis of theatrical representations of Jews, Martin offers a range of examples of how the 'real' are represented, from the anonymous puppets of Hotel Modern's *Kamp* and the "mere speaking tubes" (90) as Peter Weiss described the figures in his production *The Investigation*, to the autobiographical self-performance mode of Leeny Sack and the biographical portrayal in Emily Mann's *Annulla*, to the verbatim performance of Anna Deavere Smith's *Fires in the Mirror* and David Hare's monologue *Via Dolorosa*.

Martin highlights some key ideological distinctions between the choices she examines, such as the contrast between Hare's singular voice that dominates his narrative and Deavere Smith's multiplicity of characterisations, and the capacity of Hare's accomplished and entertaining text to smooth over the "complexity of the convictions, history, and suffering of those he observes" (107), rather than leaving the pauses for thought Martin identifies in the work of Sack and Mann that enable us to struggle with sometimes irreconcilable realities. In the following chapter, Martin critiques not only the play *My Name is Rachel Corrie* for its one-sided perspective on the events that occurred in Gaza, but also interrogates the context of its original production, transfers, and the press discourse that surrounded its development for the Royal Court theatre in the UK, arguing that this further exacerbated what she reads as a problematic ideological intervention into a complex political situation. Emerging throughout the study is Martin's conviction that a theatre of the real should strive for ways of embracing and sustaining the contradictions – and sometimes irresolution – of the real events of history. Such a perspective is firmly allied to a poststructuralist politics, advocating pluralism, complexity and scepticism as necessary strategies to combat the over-simplified ideological narratives of the mass media's representations of the real. For Martin, what is required

is “an aesthetic and analytical discourse that represents the real in order to call it into question” (174).

The importance of this study lies in its broadening of our conception of a theatre of the real, and its capacity to reach beyond an analysis of such theatre practice on its own terms to ask critical and topical questions concerning the nature of ‘the real’ itself, and how diverse structures of performance and narrative enable us to read, conceptualise and invoke reality in different ways. Martin offers a strong and persuasive conviction that an analysis of the ways in which ‘the real’ is narrated and constructed by theatre and performance models can impact significantly on our own rendering and conceptualisation of ‘reality’ outside the theatre. In this way the performances under discussion constitute not merely the consequences of real events but active participants and agents in how such events might develop for better or worse. To conclude in Martin’s own words: “[b]y contributing to debates and disputes in public life.... theatre of the real can make a generative and critical intervention in people’s prejudices and the limitations of public understanding. Theatre of the real can also oversimplify, inflame prejudices, and support one-sided perspectives.” (120)

Key words: the Real; Documentary; Political

Abstract: *Theatre of the Real* examines a diverse range of pre-dominantly, but not exclusively, North American theatre practice including documentary and verbatim performance, autobiography, mixed media and puppetry and interactive performance. Martin’s analysis focuses on how these various models of theatre engage with and represent real events, in the context of a mass-mediatised society. This study is essential reading for students and scholars engaging with late twentieth century and contemporary performance, histories of political theatre and those engaged in related disciplines such as documentary film, and media or cultural studies, particularly those specialising in Jewish histories and the Holocaust. It is accessible reading for intermediate to advanced

undergraduate students, and offers important new perspectives for postgraduate students and academic researchers and specialists.